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ABSTRACT

One of the main differences between the whole language position and the more traditional views lies in the epistemological base upon which whole language is rooted. Although whole language proponents may not have clearly put forth an epistemology upon which their views of reading acquisition and the reading process are based, still a careful comparison of the tenets of postmodernism with the positions commonly identified with the whole language movement finds much similarity between the two. In this paper, these similarities are explored. It is suggested that the disagreement between whole language proponents and those supporting more traditional methodologies is mainly due to the differences between the scientific method and the postmodern philosophy adopted as the basis of whole language. Contains 22 references. (Author/EF)

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Reading and Postmodernism

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Running Head: POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract

One of the main differences between the whole language position and the more traditional views lies in the epistemological base upon which whole language is rooted. Although whole language proponents may not have clearly put forth an epistemology upon which the their views of reading acquisition and the reading process are based, still a careful comparison of the tenets of postmodernism with the positions commonly identified with the whole language movement finds much similarity between the two. In this paper, these similarities are explored. It is suggested that the disagreement between whole language proponents and those supporting more traditional methodologies is mainly due to the differences between the scientific method and the postmodern philosophy adopted as the basis of whole language.

Reading and Postmodernism

As educators, our endeavors must be guided by *philosophy*. At the literal level the word implies a love of wisdom. This need for a philosophy must be seen as a caveat for all that is said here. We often speak of science and philosophy and see them as somehow in juxtaposition to each other. It is helpful to think of two ways of operating, one involving opinion, metaphysics, and as an open system influenced by contemporary culture, and the other involving observable, measured, processed data. Here, the system is closed and variables are purposefully isolated. In this article we are calling the first point of view philosophy and the second science. This is not to say; of course that science does not have a controlling philosophy. The distinction is artificial and contrived and subject to the corresponding limitations.

The field of reading education is highly dependent on models- a fact that places us immediately in the science/philosophy dialectic. Even a cursory look at an elementary reading methods or theory text makes the dependence on models apparent (Singer and Ruddell, 1994). Most such texts are replete with a vast variety of flow charts and diagrams demonstrating the reading process. It seems that this notion of a usable model of the reading process lies at the very heart of reading instruction. The model that informs the teacher's outlook on the reading process will, certainly, have some impact on the teaching methods used.

McConkie (1979) comments about the great diversity that exists in the approaches taken to reading instruction. Some approaches emphasize concept formation while others center on the development of a sight

vocabulary. Some follow an orientation which is clearly skills oriented. Still others are perceptual in outlook. More current approaches emphasize meaning to the virtual exclusion of the correlates that lead to meaning.

If we know certain facts about skilled reading, then certain models and theories of reading are rejected along with the corresponding curricular and instructional practices. Too often, however, theoreticians have downplayed the importance of research into the nature of skilled reading. Therefore left with little in the way of empirical evidence (science), as McConkie (1979) points out individuals have often made decisions based on emotional factors, i.e.. What matches one's preconceived beliefs about the nature of learning, children, and teaching.

Major theoretical viewpoints

Many models of reading view reading primarily as decoding (Gough and Hillinger, 1980). From this perspective, reading is text driven; the text is the primary focus of reading. Reading progresses from letter to sound to sound combinations to words. The focus here is on meaning, but from this "bottom-up" perspective, words must be decoded and that involves "cracking the code."

Reading, in what has been termed "bottom-up" conceptions, is seen as an unnatural act. Dealing with text is seen as a rather different language process than language processes common to conversational language. While it is true that inner language and inner speech are involved in reading, this process is not central in bottom-up models. It seems as if Gough (1980) and other bottom-up theorists are not interested in the process of meaning making. This is not considered unimportant, but rather a by-product of successful negotiation of the bottom-up processes: skills or correlates of the reading act. In his model, Gough has typically spoken of something called "Merlin" and "TPWSGWTAU" (The Place Where Sentences Go When They Are Understood). Both "Merlin" and "TPWSGWTAU" are seen as mystical, undefined processes.

These bottom-up models of reading dominated the field of reading education for several decades. Materials and reading methods texts reflected this view. The main feature that characterizes this conceptual framework is the notion that decoding precedes and directs meaning making. Reading is typically word-by-word, or in the case of familiar phrases, phrase-by-phrase. Decoding precedes and acts inseparably in the development of a sight vocabulary. This might be likened to the building of a house. Work must begin with the foundation and proceed upward.

In contrast to bottom-up models of reading stand "top-down" or whole language models. The two most familiar proponents of this view are probably Frank Smith (1994) and Kenneth Goodman (1976). The top-down view is opposite in almost every detail from the bottom-up outlook. If the bottom-up position may be characterized by its assertion that decoding precedes meaning, the top-down point of view may be characterized by the assertion that meaning generally precedes and causes word recognition.

Top-down theorists see the primary components of successful meaning making as being the knowledge, schemata, and predictions that the reader brings to the text. Goodman (1976) calls reading a psycholinguistic guessing game. The reader is always predicting and sampling the text to confirm predictions. Rarely is reading a word-by-word proposition with a one-to-one correspondence with textual representations. Never is efficient reading viewed in this manner. In terms of meaning, reading is always a tentative, ever changing endeavor.

Reading from this perspective is seen as a natural act. Literacy and spoken language follow a similar developmental pattern. Just as speakers and listeners seem to be actively contributing their knowledge to the process of spoken language comprehension, so also, say Goodman (1976) and Smith (1994), may reading be viewed as a process of active text construction. Instead of being taught to read directly, through skill lessons and sight vocabulary memorization, children learn to read by immersion in a print rich environment which allows them to experiment with and construct and reconstruct the meaning of written text. Ineffective reading is viewed as dependence on (as opposed to sampling of) the letters, sounds, and words of printed text.

The key to understanding top-down theorizing is meaning. Reading is meaning first, meaning in process, and meaning as product. Decoding, phonics, text, orthography, all of these are at best only incidentally important in the reading process. To use the building metaphor again, we might liken reading to remodeling. In this metaphor, the building, (the reader's prior knowledge), is already constructed. Remodeling rearranges and changes things (constructs the text according to the reader's unique outlook).

With the traditional view, reading instruction involved phonics drills and practice. Attention was focused on how to improve decoding and find "rules" with widespread application. Rules were often inconsistent across reading programs. The scope and sequence of reading instruction also differed widely. Debate tended to center around the approach taken to phonics instruction rather than the issue of phonics instruction *per se*. Lists of sight words were created to use for drill in instant recognition.

In recent years, the move has been toward viewing reading as being more synonymous with meaning. An effective reader is one who gets the "whole picture." Reading is the reconstruction of the writer's ideas in the reader's unique way rather than the reciting of the writer's words. Rosenblatt stated this transactional view of reader's response to literature as early as 1938. The idea here is that comprehension can occur at many levels and is experience dependent (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Reading, in this top-down view, involves using semantic and syntactic processes first and resorting to what is actually printed only secondarily. A good reader is one who predicts and samples. S/he predicts what might be said in the text and samples the print to confirm or disconfirm that hypothesis. Phonetic analysis is slow and generally unnecessary.

One thing is certain; there is a decided move among many reading educators for a balanced approach. Whole language is not a burning issue to many, although much of the debate, such as how to best teach phonics (Chall and Popp, 1996; Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, and Vento-Zogby, 1996), shows that whole language concepts are still very influential. The "balancing act" is precarious for many of us, trying to find the right mix of meaning and skill. This approach attempts to address the "best of both worlds." The approach has brought some sense of closure to what was, in many ways, a long and sometimes ugly debate. Still, it would be incorrect to say that there are not voices calling for a more "unmixed" approach. has been identified with the top-down view for many years.

So much for an analysis of the current models of reading as addressed from the point of pedagogy; except to point out, as Levine did in his 1994 Atlantic Monthly article, *The Great Debate Revisited*, that all of this has caused a crisis in some college and university Education departments. Some potential faculty candidates are rejected for being "too" whole language and some for not being whole language "enough."

Whole language and postmodernism

The main purpose of this discussion is to examine some of the tenants of postmodernism to see what relationship it has as a philosophical underpinning for the whole language movement which gained wide spread support in the 1980's and early 90's. This may well be considered more of a historical issue for some but certainly an emotionally charged issue for others. Is postmodernism in whole or in part a controlling philosophy? I hope to set forth some identifiable characteristics of postmodernism so that such a comparison may be made. In doing this, in some ways, I am attempting impossibility. At least this is so from the postmodernist's point of view. By its very nature, it defies definition. It is illusive, and hard to "get a handle on."

Nevertheless within the past decade or so, references in scholarly writings devoted to social criticism or literary concerns to postmodernism have increased dramatically. It has become a major philosophical vantagepoint used in the social sciences. Jameson (1988) points out the definitional problem even as he, like many others, begin to try to define it. According to Jameson, the questioning of truths usually taken for granted and experimental lifestyles have no doubt added to the rise of postmodernism. Postmodernism seems to define the spirit of the age; the tendency to question, to deny, and yet never absolutely to affirm any new reality.

Postmodernism is a term usually applied to the analysis of society that concerns itself with irony, contingency, and popular culture (Gitlin, 1989) It represents a sense of ambivalence towards the traditional epistemologies. It is wary of traditional claims for truth and sources of knowledge.

Postmodernism is concerned with deconstructing such claims and bringing them into question. By deconstructing, we refer to "debunking" sacred cows and questioning long held positions. Lyotard, in The Postmodern Condition (1984), questions the notion of metanarratives or universal truths. The notion of knowledge being grounded in scientific laws or absolute principles is brought into question. Although a positivist may deny the absolute *knowability* of truth, his or her faith remains with the scientific process and the idea that science is self-correcting. What then is the *postmodernist* interested in? What is the goal, if we may speak of such a thing, of postmodernism? Is it merely a criticism or does it have something to offer in place of the truth it rejects?

Postmodernists are interested in "text" which might be defined as context mediated by an observer or participant, sometimes referred to as a reader (Rosenau, 1992). The aim of postmodernism is to deconstruct the text and see how it plays out in the life of the reader. In this case we refer to a careful examination of the contexts or interactions and the way the reader frames interactions and perceives events. Since we all come to life (the text) with a myriad of differences (race, gender, age, culture, etc.), we each read a given text in different ways.

In practice, this sets postmodernism against the notion of unity of thought. The idea of agreement is viewed with suspicion. Positivism is rejected as an irrelevant or faulty perspective- flawed at its very core since it embraces the notion of absolutism. Absolutism is not accepted due to a belief that truth is a matter of perception. What may be MY truth, may not be YOUR truth. Seemingly embracing realism and encouraging actual experience and yet denying realistic absolute truth, postmodernism seems to rise above the idealism/realism dichotomy. Objectivity is denied as an

impossibility. It is impossible for the reader to read any text apart from his or her own perspective.

Faucault (1973), one of the gurus of postmodernism finds the modern scientific view flawed for ignoring the human condition and seeking to use social science to objectively predict behavior. Such prediction is seen as misguided and invalid. The best that can be hoped for is a description of a social or behavioral phenomenon and that, too, is subject to the view of the reader, the way s/he deconstructs the text and the unique way that a given situation is perceived.

Derrida (1976) has used the term "differance" to refer to our efforts at communication. In postmodernism, the method of dealing with written text and the role of the reader do not change from that involving situational text. The meaning in the thoughts of the sender and the different meaning constructed by the reader always complicate speech and writing.

Postmodernism, then, appears to have some identifiable characteristics:

1. It is not clearly definable.
2. It tends towards the questioning of traditional truths.
3. It emphasizes the contingent nature of knowledge.
4. Traditional scientific methodology is brought into question.
5. It values diversity of thought.
6. Positivism and objectivity are denied.
7. The emphasis is on the reader as opposed to the text or the objective content of the text (which is denied).
8. A reader/writer dichotomy is affirmed.

What I want to do at this point is to assess the whole language movement from the perspective of these criteria. The first criteria, that postmodernism lacks clear definition, is very apparent. Definitions of whole language in texts as well as in practice vary widely. The name seems to suggest the idea of keeping language whole, but it does not specify pedagogical direction. What it means to keep language whole and how that is worked out in the day-to-day practice of literacy instruction is not clear. Strickland (1995) calls whole language a "unique and evolving" or changing framework. As I have discussed whole language with colleagues and students, I have found definitions ranging from the peripheral, such as it means "involving all the senses" to the more linguistically centered, "It's a theory about how children learn language," to a more "party line" response involving the notion of immersion in a print rich environment. Clearly the movement *is* evolving, and, like postmodernism is not easily defined.

Secondly, whole language questions the traditional notion of truth as it applies to reading instruction. The conventional wisdom involving the correlates of the reading process and the psychology of reading are deemed irrelevant or at least inconsequential. It is apparent that Goodman (1987), the unofficial spokesperson for the movement, finds the traditional paradigms flawed since the study of the components of language does not keep language whole. Although researchers such as Stanovich (1980) and Samuels (1988) have conducted extensive research showing the primary importance of bottom-up processes, especially automaticity, this notion is rejected. Since such research, by its very nature, calls for the isolation of variables to discern relative importance, it is unlikely that experimental research will be much of a possibility with whole language. This is especially true when we attempt to describe the components of the reading

process. The more traditional research-based view represented by Adams', *Beginning to Read*, (1990) is rejected on the basis that language is not kept whole.

On the third count of the contingency of truth in postmodernism, the whole method of investigation into the nature of reading, namely miscue analysis, is based on the notion of contingency. "Mistakes" or "errors" are renamed "miscues" and qualitatively analyzed. All of the reader's responses to the printed word are seen as tentative and contingent on further analysis of the text. Miscue analysis views the reader as an explorer analyzing and exploring the text, coming to tentative conclusions and holding these conclusions until further information about the text is collected. Miscue analysis is firm in this denial of the term "error." Reading becomes an inexact text construction. This has especially "muddied the waters" concerning what constitutes reading disability and how to deal with it.

The rejection of traditional scientific methodology by the whole language movement is clear. Goodman clearly prefers a qualitative point of view in terms of research epistemologies. Weaver (1996), a whole language proponent has been quick to criticize the traditional scientific methodology employed by Adams in her synthesis of research regarding emergent literacy. The notion is that some components of the reading process cannot be analyzed apart from any other component. Comparisons of whole language and more conventional methodologies which have been conducted by researchers are considered irrelevant because of the rejection of the scientific method. Without such comparisons, it is difficult to investigate the claims of the whole language movement and its stories of success. Unless a method of comparison can be devised, decisions will be largely left to personal inclination instead of scientifically verified information.

Diversity of thought is valued in the whole language classroom and no "one" answer is considered correct. As miscue analysis makes clear, all responses are to be valued in the same way. Responses are neither "right" nor "wrong." They are qualitatively better only by degrees. Meaning is preferred over graphophonemic exactness. Whole language views each reader as an interpreter constructing text as opposed to a decoder finding the right or exact words for the page.

In the same light, as research epistemologies, positivism and objectivity are denied and relativism is upheld. As in postmodernism, the emphasis is on how the reader experiences the text rather than any objective truth concerning the text. In fact, by its very nature, whole language rejects the idea of an objective truth of any given text. Reading becomes much more interpretation than communication. This relativism associated with whole language is clearly evident in Goodman's little book for parents, *What's Whole in Whole Language?*. Standardized testing is disavowed, along with basal readers, and scope and sequence, skills-based teaching. There appears to be no absolute "right or wrong" when it comes to reading. Only idiosyncratic text construction matters.

The last two characteristics of postmodernism, the reader/writer dichotomy and the importance of the reader over the text are very central to whole language. Reading is seen more as an interaction than an activity. It is an interaction where reader and text do not always agree. The reader brings her entire life journey and perspective to the text and each reader is unique in that pilgrimage. It is through a reader/writer interaction that the text is constructed. What is received may not have much similarity to what is transmitted. But throughout the process, it is the reader who is supreme

and the correctness of interpretation cannot ultimately be called into question.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is my contention that the whole language movement was/is firmly rooted in postmodernism as an epistemological framework for its positions and conclusions. This is not meant to detract from the positive contributions of the whole language movement such as the use of authentic literature and the rejection and virtual elimination of mindless basal stories. This does not deny that whole language methodology and miscue analysis in particular have something to offer to teachers and researchers. It does, however seem to imply three rather inescapable conclusions:

First, whole language proponents are unlikely to accept empirical research into their methodology or its success or lack thereof- since objectivity is soundly denied. This complicates the validation of the whole language position. There must be a tacit *a priori* agreement with the epistemological point of view of the whole language movement before any analysis is likely to be accepted.

Secondly, there will likely exist a rather profound difference between the views of whole language proponents such as Kenneth Goodman and Constance Weaver and scientific/statistical researchers such as Marilyn Adams and Keith Stanovich for the foreseeable future. The two points of view are diametrically opposed, and it seems unlikely that common ground can be found.

And, lastly, debates as to the effectiveness of whole language, such as have recently occurred in California, are likely to be confusing and difficult to understand until it is made clear that such debates are actually more philosophical than scientific in nature. This is undoubtedly the main point

here. Whole language seems to be more a matter of philosophy than science.

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